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WORK/DEATH, OF EACH IN THEIR OWN

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WORK/DEATH, OF EACH IN THEIR OWN

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University

by

Micah H. Weber

BFA Pacific Northwest College of Art, 2014
MFA Virginia Commonwealth University, 2018

Program Director: Stephen Vitiello

Advisors: Orla Mc Hardy, Robert Paris, Pam Turner

Dedicated to Roseanne Roseanne

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abstract.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the
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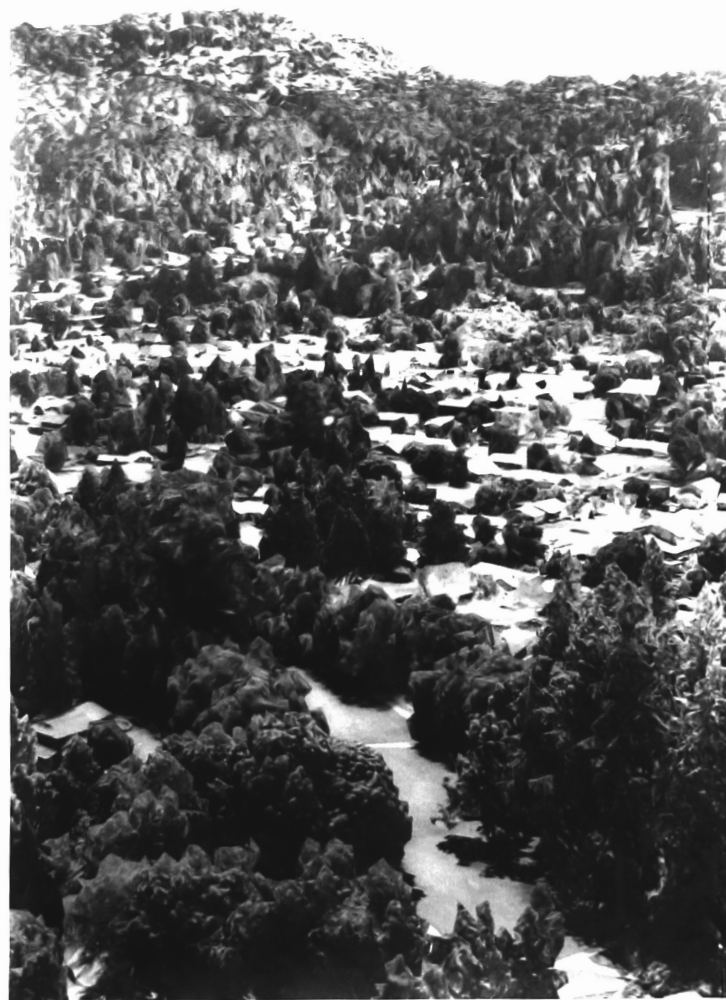
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Writings in support of my visual thesis, including some background,
and bibliographic information: Oregon/Death/Animation/Vocation and
the artist as an agent of potential.



Part 1. to speak death, and mean it.

There was an emperor in Rome who had his horoscope inscribed on the ceiling of his throne room. The inscription was designed to display beyond any doubt that the emperor's powers were ordained by the gods and inscrutable to all who visited.

Adjacent to his throne was constructed a special chamber, where there lay a hidden section of his destiny left out of sight: the part of his constellation where his death could be divined.

I imagine the access to this room remained guarded, or the legibility of the inscription concealed. Much like Kafka before the law: access is possible, just not in the meantime.

Alterity, or hiddenness, is revealed the moment an obstacle for comprehension presents itself. The obscured springs forth and calls out in the form of a mystery. To respond to an alterity requires a renegotiation of current norms. When Moses answered the call of the burning bush, he created a set of new laws.

With new media, new laws are born. It has been this way since the beginning of the written word.¹

And yet, when disaster comes - language returns to the blunt instrument that crafted it: A gasp, a gag, a whimper are the sounds of the end of the world. Language, at the sight of what it has yet to witness, grows mute, and barbaric.

I suspect it is of no wonder, the words we use to cry out in pain are not unlike those we used as children before learning to speak. Our words become obstacles when their sounds become confused with their meaning.

Pain decreates language. This is a tactic used to colonize the minds of torture victims by countless states. If you can destroy a person's language, you are one step closer to occupying the last frontiers of their mind.²

For the emperor and his horoscope, a belief in magic is exploited as a tool for legitimizing power. Through the mystification of material things and deeds, the emperor can conceal the means of his power and operate free of critique. For the hopeless, magic can be called upon in a moment of desperation. Unfortunately, magic is rarely survived by the hopeless.

1. Holl, *The Moses Complex: Freud, Schoenberg, Straub/Huillet*, especially chapter 1: "Before the Law".

2. Scarry, *The Body in Pain*. Chapter 1: "The Structure of Torture".

It is for this reason Andrei Gorkachov in Tarkovsky's *Nostalgia* dies crossing the water of the mineral pool.

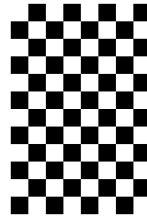
When the trapped “jumpers” leaping from the upper floors of the World Trade Center on 9/11 had made a choice to end their lives by falling as opposed to burning, I wonder whether their minds, faced with these two options leading to death, were actually capable of thinking thoughts in terms of how we think of “thinking thoughts.” I can only speculate - and I would caution speculation in this instance - that the thoughts of those who are faced with conditions like those of the 9/11 jumpers, cease to be thoughts as we know them, and are instead within the realm of an unimaginable thinking, whose conclusions are all we have left to understand.

Those who choose - as we may think of choice in these matters - to die rather than suffer another moment, could in a sense be enacting a kind of magic over their lives.

Anthropologist Joseba Zulaika recalls in his book *Basque Violence: Metaphor and Sacrament*, how in his hometown of Itziar, Spain there was a time in his childhood when adults had spoken of witchcraft as “real.”³ He remembers how village elders had entangled magic with biography, and placed themselves within traditional narratives of witchcraft - transcending distinctions between reality and the imaginary. There was a popular saying he writes, “that all witches disappeared with the shotguns of Eibar,” a nearby town that had manufactured the guns.⁴ For Zulaika, ETA terrorists from his hometown held comparable roles in their history as witches had. Terrorists and witches represent a bridging and tension between a dissolution of traditions of the past, and the progress of the present.

3. Zulaika 5.

4. *ibid.*



~~~

Returning to a place after a long stretch of time - experiencing the effects of weather against cheap housing - like a jump cut in cinema, from past time to future time - where a community has been embedded, washed away by heavy rain and an oppressive grey-scape - I think of the volcanic ash that once blanketed this landscape, and the smoke of last years fire.

“No sense / In crossing a mountain with nobody living in it. No sense / In fighting their fires. / West coast is something nobody with sense would understand. / We crossed them mountains, eating each other sometimes ... / We are a coast people / There is nothing but ocean out beyond us. We grasp / The first thing coming.”<sup>5</sup>

---

5. Spicer 421.

THE LITTLE  
BOY W/ A  
KNIFE

BEYOND  
THE SLOPE  
OF A SMALL  
HILL (PASTORAL  
SCENE).

Part 2. these things take time.

I. we die later.

My father is older than most fathers for people my age. I do not consider his age a special circumstance, but I do think of it as a useful explanation for why, from a very young age, I can remember conversations about dying. On most days when we ran errands he would take a detour to park next to the beach to watch the tide come in. He would tell me about the water, why it was choppy, and what kind of boats should or should not leave the harbor. Smoking a cigarette, he would point out to a blank spot in the waves and tell me that when he is ready to die, he wants to walk out into the ocean and let the sea take him. "There would be no body left to burden anyone," he would always explain. I remember thinking of this as a kind of sinister posturing, but I now wonder if there isn't a practical purpose behind his musings: by confiding in the impressions of a child, it could be a way to hit reset on what he has learned in old age and what seems all but impossible for a child to understand - everyone dies.<sup>6</sup>

---

6. #live laugh love.

The philosopher Emanuel Levinas says, death is not a moment of death - in time - but the fact of relating to the possible, as possible.<sup>7</sup> A possibility that is non-transferable, unavoidable, always anticipated, a movement of inaccessibility, and a phenomena of the end, as well as an end of the phenomena. He writes of death as a destination from which all is projected. A movement where death is: "An extreme possibility that surpasses all others and next to which all others grow pale; a possibility by which being sets itself off from all other possibilities, which then become insignificant."<sup>8</sup>

I have always believed that experience is no more than the result of encountering an endless opposition to life, and somehow engendering the courage to carry on. How I could ever factor in the idea of having a vocation, or the language to ever speak to anything in an honest way, is at times unimaginable. In a sense I see the need for small-talk, or a quiet cough to break the silence, as a casual flight from the certainty that not all is well, and that our positions are indeed vulnerable from elsewhere.

So then the questions I have involve all the big things and how they are ultimately made up of all the little things. From the words above, I see a fulcrum in "somehow," "unimaginable," and "need." As if there can be sourced a means that has yet to present itself in service of fulfilling an inconsolable - searching - lack. I assume that at any point on the timeline of history, a very hungry figure can be presented as being propelled towards an end. Whether their belly is full or empty is what we call politics. Otherwise the relations between individuals are bound by virtue of their mutual exposure to each other, and whether or not they accept their precarious dilemma as a shared experience.

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7. Levinas 52.

8. Ibid. 51.

II.

Whereas my father was more of a self absorbed philosopher with the personality of a tornado - regretting very little - my mother was a romantic to the core. She yearned for life in a very tragic sense.

She would say that cancer was like a passing friend. I think the whole thing gave her a sense of identity: she knew who she was when she was sick and never really complained about it. I suspect her fearlessness, strength and candor regarding death were in fact a means of having agency if not a modicum of self esteem. On the day of her final diagnosis I drove her to the doctor's office on two separate occasions. The first time was to discuss and schedule a surgery to remove a colon polyp discovered the previous week. The second trip was to talk about the thing her diagnostician failed to notice on the first visit. Namely a huge tumor in her liver. There were two strange events that followed from this discovery.

- Before the end of the doctor's visit, my mother had worked up the courage to ask how long she had left to live.<sup>9</sup> Her doctor, the diagnostician, had had his back to us while gathering his things. Upon hearing the question, he spun around indignantly and yelled at her. He demanded to know how she could dare ask such a question of him. I stared wide eyed and watched as she apologized repeatedly in an effort to undo the terrible mistake she had made: namely, possessing the vanity of needing an answer to one of the most basic questions anyone could ever want to know. This flip in power was incredible. The remaining time of the visit - the one whose sole purpose was to inform my mother that she was in fact going to die from an inoperable tumor in her liver - was spent making him feel better.
- After leaving the doctor's office, on the way to the car, in the car, and during the drive home, there was a sense of relief between my mother and I. We masked this relief with hopeful optimism, displays of calmness, and quiet statements placating each other's fears of the coming future. I say coming future now because I think that at the time the future had never been so inevitable nor concrete to either of us. I know from previous conversations that she had a solid understanding of death and dying. But never had the precarity of her condition been so certainly skewed towards death - never would it be skewed the other way either, regardless of hope - and this was in some way, a strange relief we both shared. I think for her it meant whatever circle she was living in could be completed, and for me it was no different. Apparently the test we had been training for would come to pass, and naively I was excited to follow her down that road.

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9. There's no right way to proceed with this kind of inquiry, and I imagine the only preparation most people have are from what they see in the movies.



What came next was generally pretty awful and is not worth hashing out here. I have heard stories of people becoming sick, and then gradually drifting off to the point where they die in a hospital or at home surrounded by family and loved ones. The image is usually of a graceful, peaceful exit from life. I didn't experience any of that with my mother. I have since come to suspect that these people who choose to reframe the deaths of their loved ones by way of an idealized and convenient narrative, are either ill equipped to actually accept that their loved ones may be afraid to die, and would rather through weakness or any other contrivance, prefer to live to the bitter end - because ultimately when one's life is at its end, all images of strength and perceived obligation towards optics of respectability, are rendered transparently useless - or they are simply incapable of applying language to an event that is difficult to comprehend.

~~~

The problem with loss is that it is so very cliché - and yet, it is impossible to know, or anticipate, how one will experience the process. Judith Butler proposes in her text *Precarious Life*, "Violence, Mourning, Politics" that everyone shares the capacity to grieve and mourn loss, delimiting a social realm between cultures despite political difference.

Quoting at length, Butler says of mourning:

Perhaps, one mourns when one accepts that by the loss one undergoes one will be changed, possibly forever. Perhaps mourning has to do with agreeing to undergo a transformation (perhaps one should say submitting to a transformation) the full result of which one cannot know in advance. There is losing, as we know, but there is also the transformative effect of loss, and this latter cannot be charted or planned. One can try to choose it, but it may be that this experience of transformation deconstitutes choice at some level... One cannot say, "Oh, I'll go through loss this way, and that will be the result, and I'll apply myself to the task, and I'll endeavor to achieve the resolution of grief that is before me." I think one is hit by waves, and that one starts out the day with an aim, a project, a plan, and finds oneself foiled. One finds oneself fallen. One is exhausted but does not know why. Something is larger than one's own deliberate plan, one's own project, one's own knowing and choosing.¹⁰

And on grief:

What grief displays, in contrast, is the thrall in which our relations with others hold us, in ways that we cannot always recount or explain, in ways that often interrupt the self-conscious account of ourselves we might try to provide, in ways that challenge the very notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control. I might try to tell a story here about what I am feeling, but it would have to be a story in which the very "I" who seeks to tell the story is stopped in the midst of the telling; the very "I" is called into question by its relation to the Other, a relation that does not precisely reduce me to speechlessness, but does nevertheless clutter my speech with signs of its undoing. I tell a story about the relations I choose, only to expose, somewhere along the way, the way I am gripped and undone by these very relations. My narrative falters, as it must.¹¹

10. Butler 21.

11. Ibid. 23.

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For a long time I lived under a state of perceived emergency. A transferral of having watched someone else die - I treated every bad turn in my life as if it would be the end of me. A paper cut was a brain tumor- misplacing my keys might as well have been a death sentence. Like an unfamiliar language, mourning requires a reorganization of norms - I had to learn to confront every new foothold as an event defined by the disappearance of what had previously constituted its boundaries.

III. beyond the slope of a small hill.

There is a gestural aspect to language - and perhaps any other transmission designed to communicate information: an idea is fired from one point into the direction of another. The transmission is consumed by way of an inheritance of established terms specific to the other's subjective position in life through varied filters coded universally and uniquely. This is of course a broad and incomplete generalization of how language functions. Nevertheless, there is a form at work in language that is open to a reversal of said communicability. If not, it would seem there would be no need for misunderstandings to exist.

In frame based animation a complex drawing doesn't necessitate coherent movement, or more clearly defined subject matter. Often times reduced imagery made of simple lines has a greater chance of communicating a complex idea than overly complicated, or descriptive "realistic" imagery. Something incommunicable is always present within moving image art in order for it to be read, or understood.

Norman McLaren, the experimental animator, defined animation as the art of manipulating the invisible interstices between the frames of the animated image.<sup>12</sup> For McLaren it's not what is on the frame that is important, but rather the space between each frame that creates the illusion of movement. In film theory this binding - yet divisive space - between the images of a film strip are defined as a "suture."<sup>13</sup> For a comic strip, the space between panels is called a "gutter." Time is not defined within the frame of the discrete image, but rather the differences between a series of discrete images. From one image sequentially to the next, the space demarcating differences between discrete images on a film strip, defines a span of time indicating nothing.

Much like language, successive images are created from inherited values. Each successive frame is a repetition, but also a decreation of its previous meaning. The relation that is revealed when one looks at the micro movements between the frames of a filmstrip are of potentiality, or rather a sum of each frames impoverishment. In order for movement to be communicated from a filmstrip, imagelessness, or rather incommunicability, must occur as well.

Robert Filliou says, "The absolute secret of permanent creation: not deciding, not choosing, not wanting, not owning, aware of self, wide awake. SITTING QUIETLY DOING NOTHING."<sup>14</sup> Which is to say that by way of making artworks from "sitting quietly doing nothing" is a decreative gesture - a veritable Bartleby's preference not-to.<sup>15</sup>

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12. Hoffer 5.

13. Levi 142.

14. Filliou 95.

15. See Agamben's "On Potentiality" and "Bartleby, or On Contingency".

In artworks, the task of communication often seems to require a kind of clearing away of old forms in order to establish new opportunities for experiencing the world - if only to just exhibit the possibility that there are new ways to experience the world. Power over the words we use, and the ideas we think, can become democratized, if in the event we are allowed to believe they *can* be democratized.

IV. not working. de-skilling.

The writing of Giorgio Agamben has been incredibly integral to my development as an artist, specifically his theories of potentiality.

For one year I worked as a night janitor at a local cineplex in Springfield, Oregon. Before that I had my first job pushing grocery carts at a Wal-Mart in Vancouver, Washington. This work was difficult because the building was on a steep hill, and the labor involved tying a rope to a group of shopping carts, in rain and freezing temperatures, and dragging them up a hill. At the cineplex the janitorial work was physically easier, gave me the feeling I was doing something unique with my life, and offered the opportunity to spend more time with my thoughts. I had interesting co-workers on both occasions: At Wal-Mart my peers were often transitioning from short term prison stints, or had learning disabilities preventing them from taking other kinds of work. The cineplex was grittier by comparison. My peers were either current, or former, full time drug addicts.

Attending art school was, and still is the most important move I ever made. The decision to relocate a mere 100 miles to Portland, Oregon, from Springfield, Oregon, required an apocalyptic frame of mind. Five years would pass after leaving the janitorial position before I could make this decision.

In the interim I took a classier job at a one-stop shop hardware store in Eugene, Oregon, where I drove a forklift, stacked boxes of tile, and moved pallets of dirt, etc. I focused on how to be the best worker I could, without having to learn/memorize anything pertaining to home improvement, or the stores mission statement - "The Standards of Excellence." My managers would say, "you remind me of a young me," and would then recall how they made terrible mistakes landing them in retail management. What I learned was, doing anything for any period of time longer than it takes to learn, is ultimately counter to every human urge, and requires an incredible tenacity - or wisdom that isn't taught - to move beyond.

Central to Agamben's philosophy are his ideas on potential and how they relate to actuality.<sup>16</sup> As opposed to the concept of actuality, as a realization of potential, Agamben argues that potential is in fact an actuality with a face unto itself. Whenever we talk about the faculty of something being, or not being, in one's power, we are, in Agamben's view, trafficking in the domain of potential. Basically, potential is active in actuality only by way of its privation - or, impotential.

The idea here is not dissimilar to the way a doctor is still a doctor even when not doing the things that identify one as a doctor.

---

16. Ibid.

Potential in art is an activity where poetic production is undergoing and suffering, its own decreation. By way of rendering my skilled hand, a trained discipline, useless - I in turn create new opportunities for new disciplines. Hence the reason artists so frequently talk about providing limits, rules, and structures upon their practice. For an artist, potentiality is a production of making, and unmaking. As a result, potential is in this sense not what we mean when we tell children they can grow up and become anything they want, but rather a making useless what has already been developed - a deskillling, a state of worklessness, or inoperativity. It is for this same reason that abstract art is not what we think of when we think of abstract art.

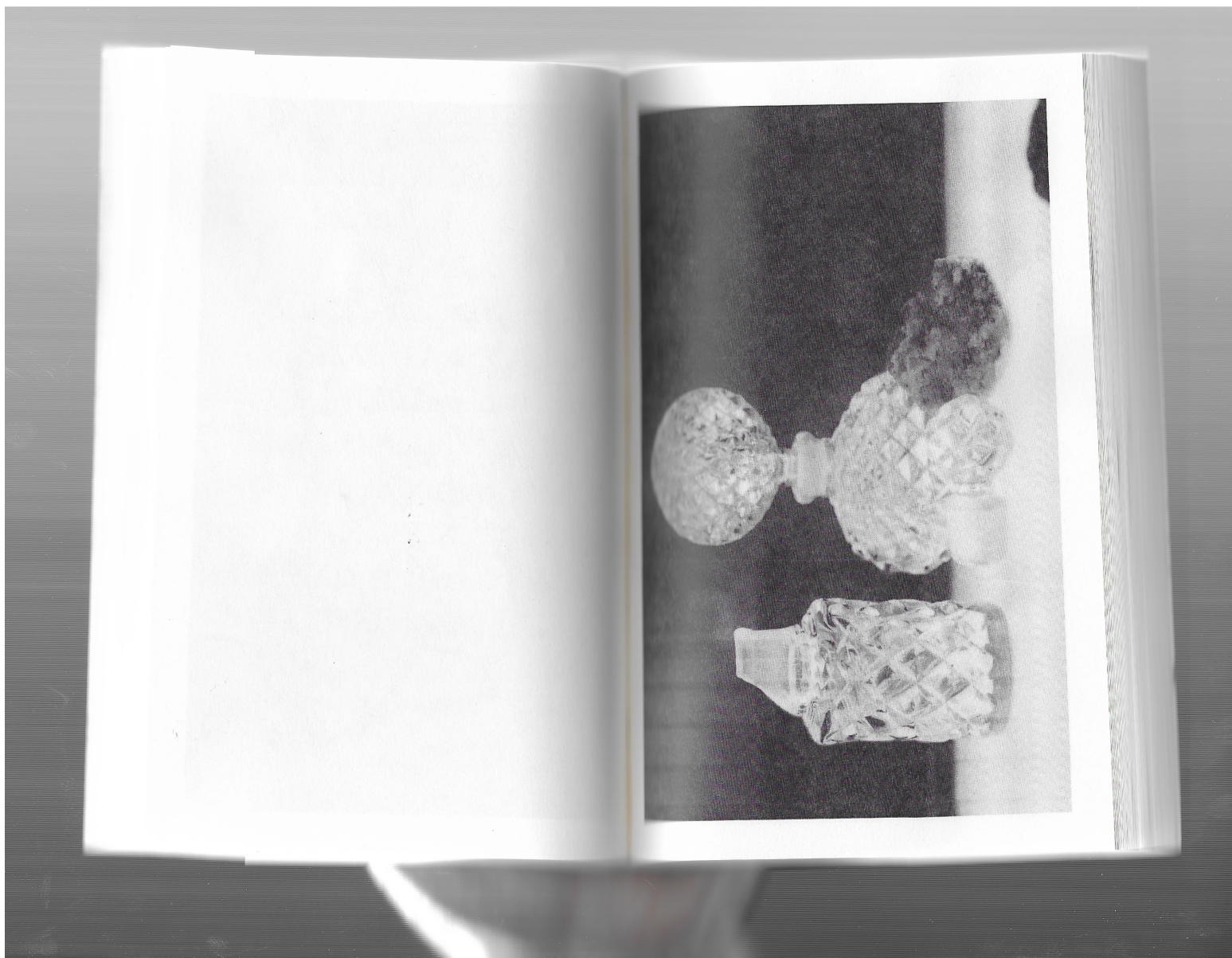
The work I did at Wal-Mart and the cineplex provided a way to survive, but it was nothing I wanted to do for very long. The reality is I have never known what I wanted to do for a living. When I was in the eighth grade I had a teacher with a poster of a green bullseye and the words: **Aim for nothing and you will hit nothing!** The poster was always within eyesight and I would read it several times a day. One day I realized the meaning wasn't so clear, and that I could aim for nothing and successfully hit nothing.



references.

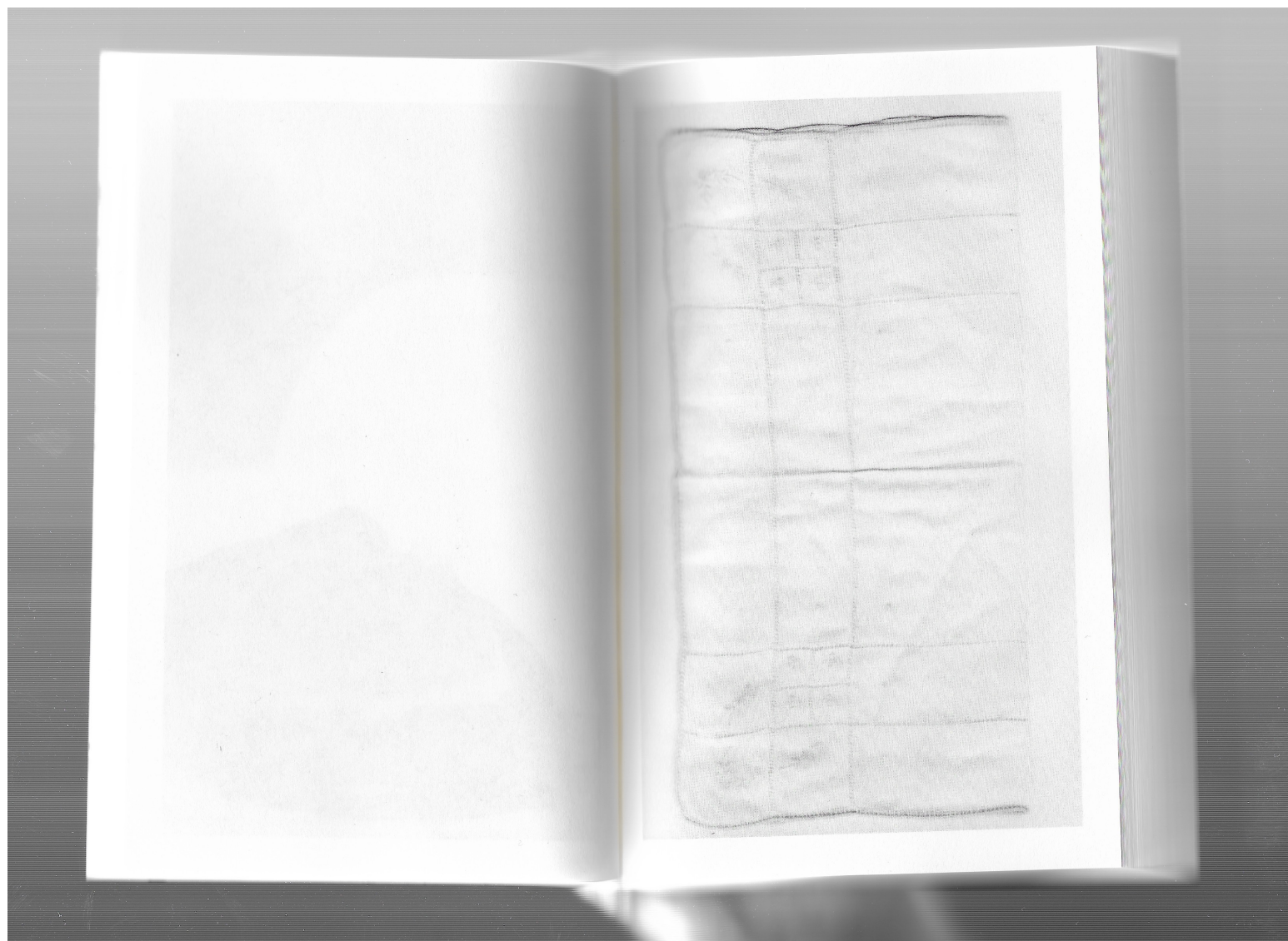
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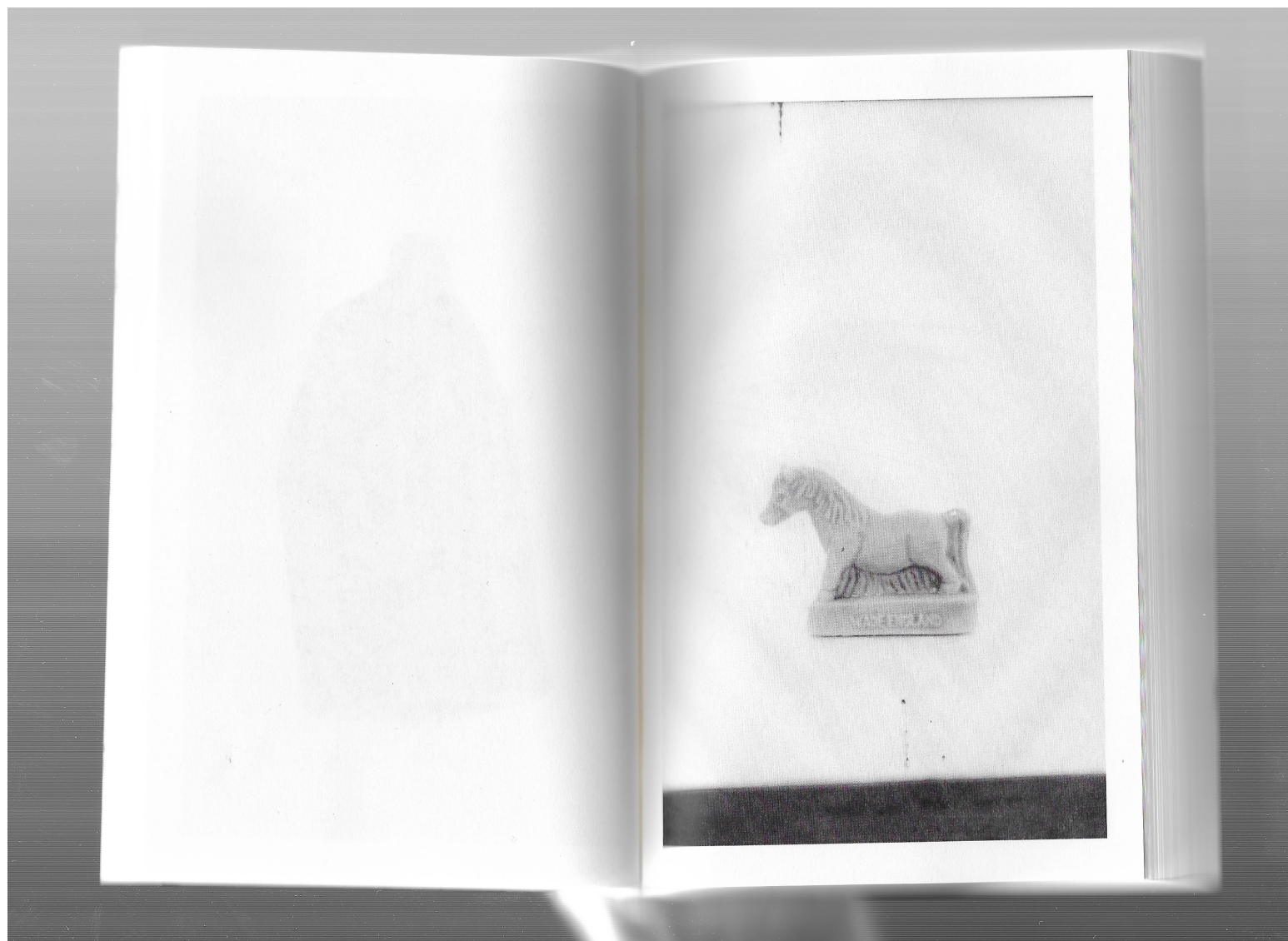
Appendix I. a collection of things & other work.

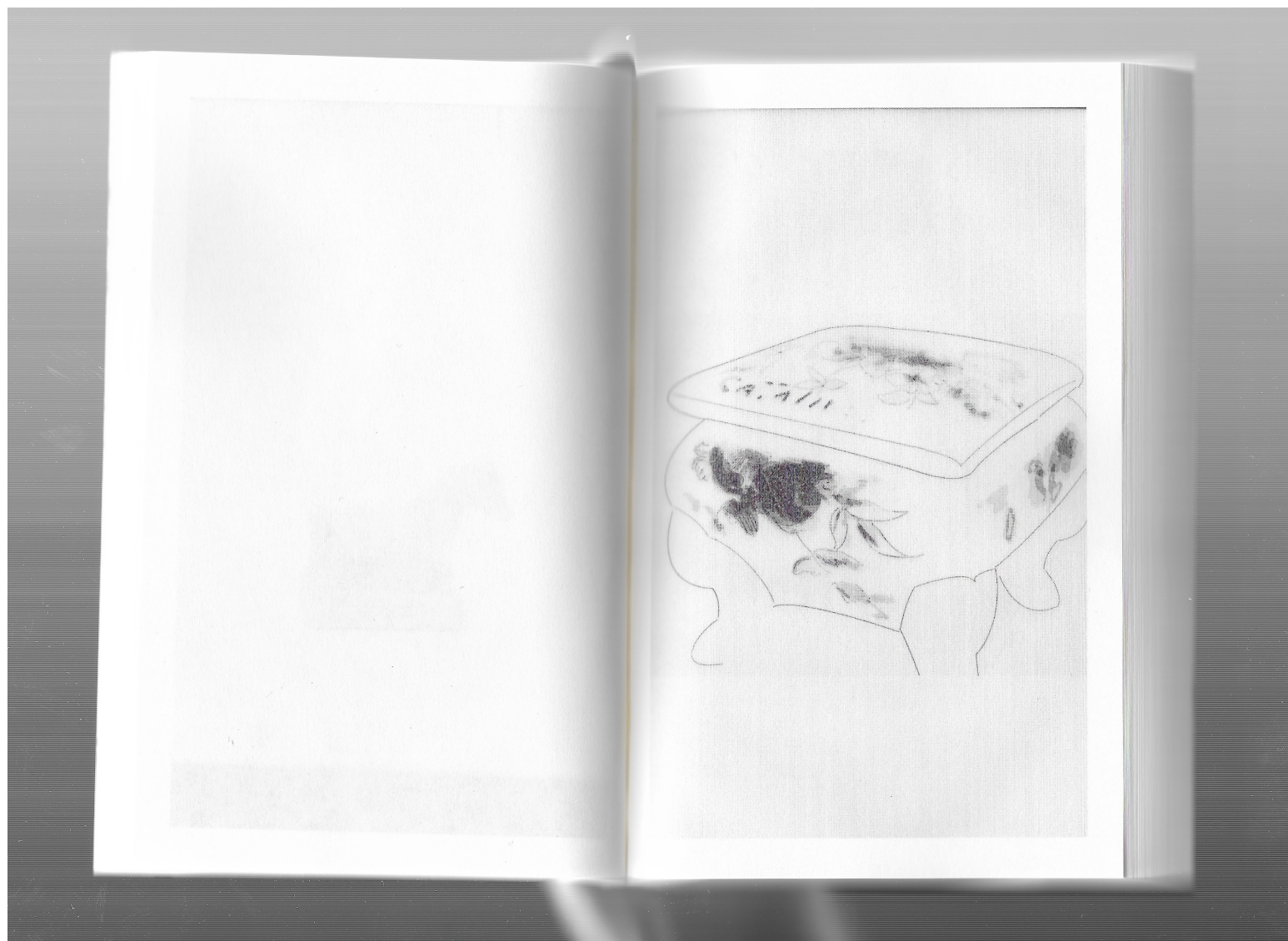








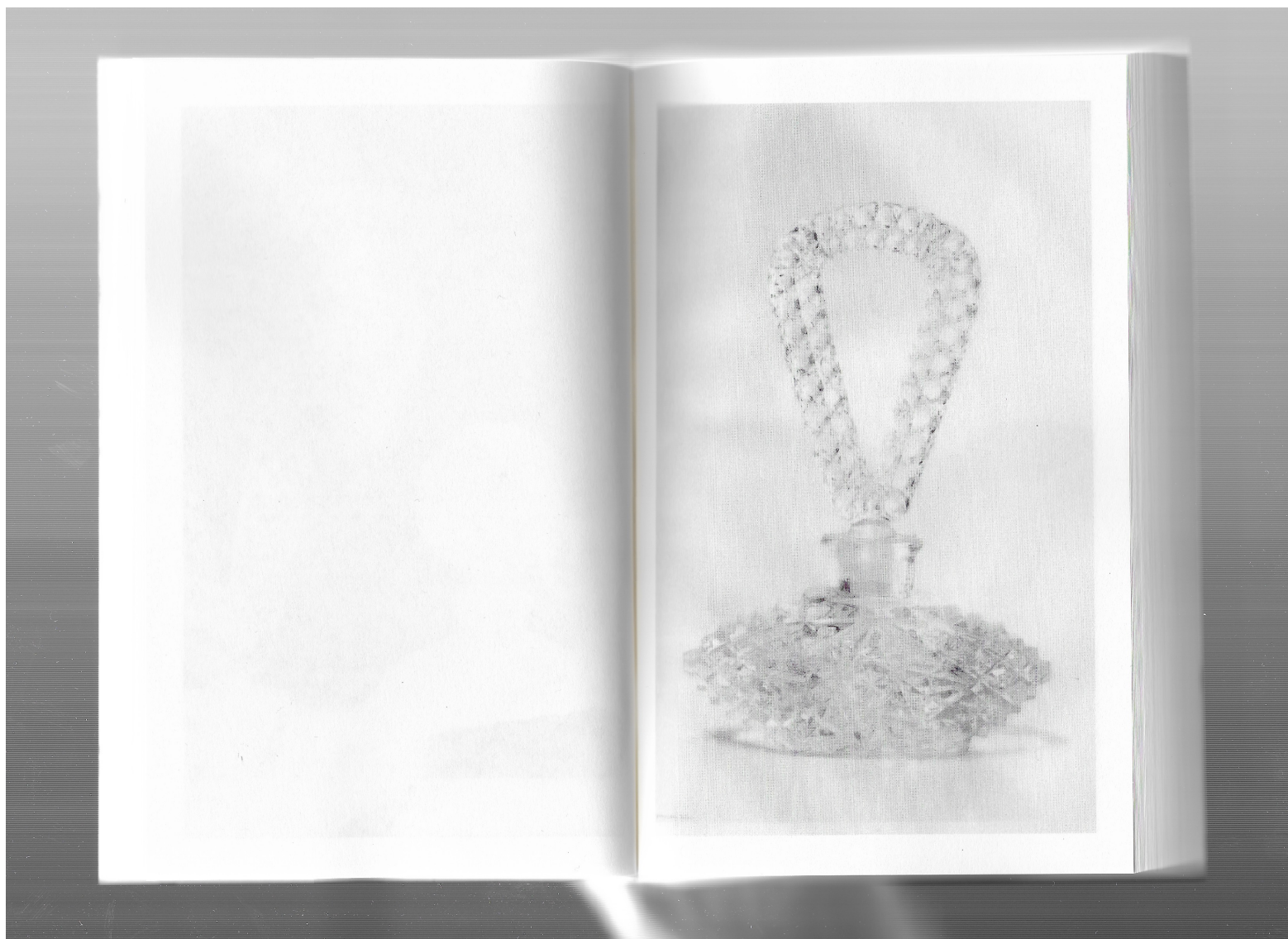


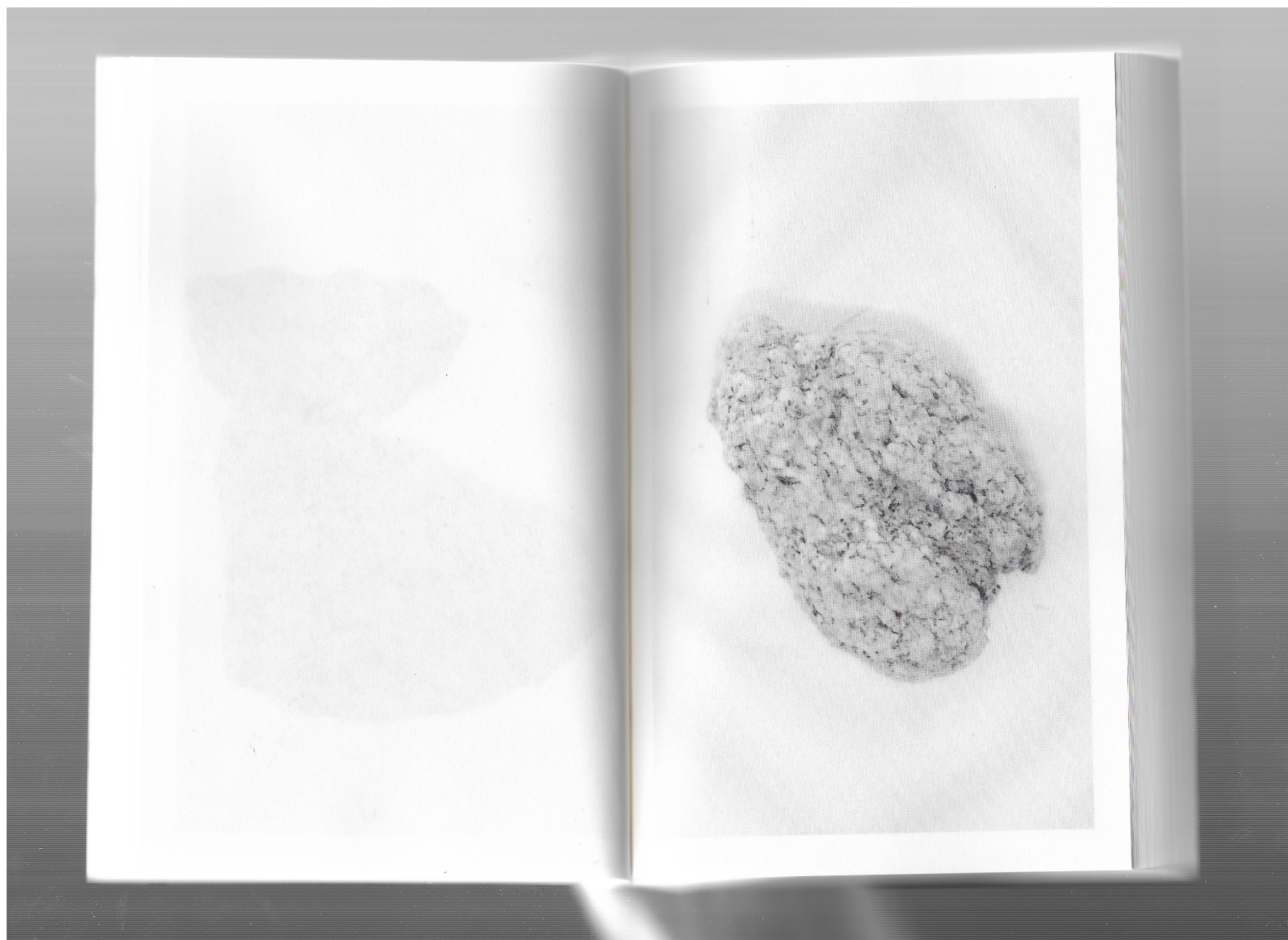




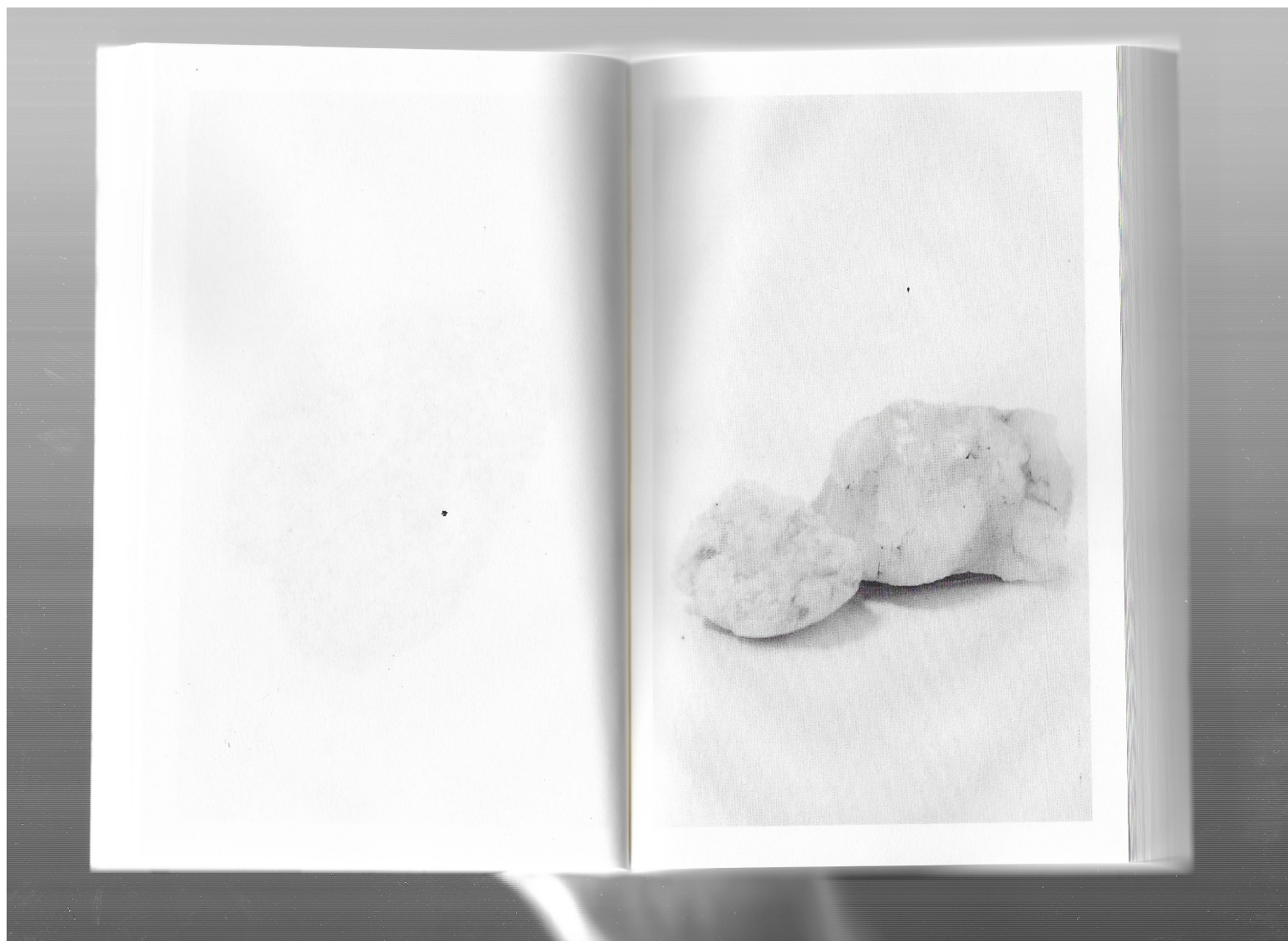












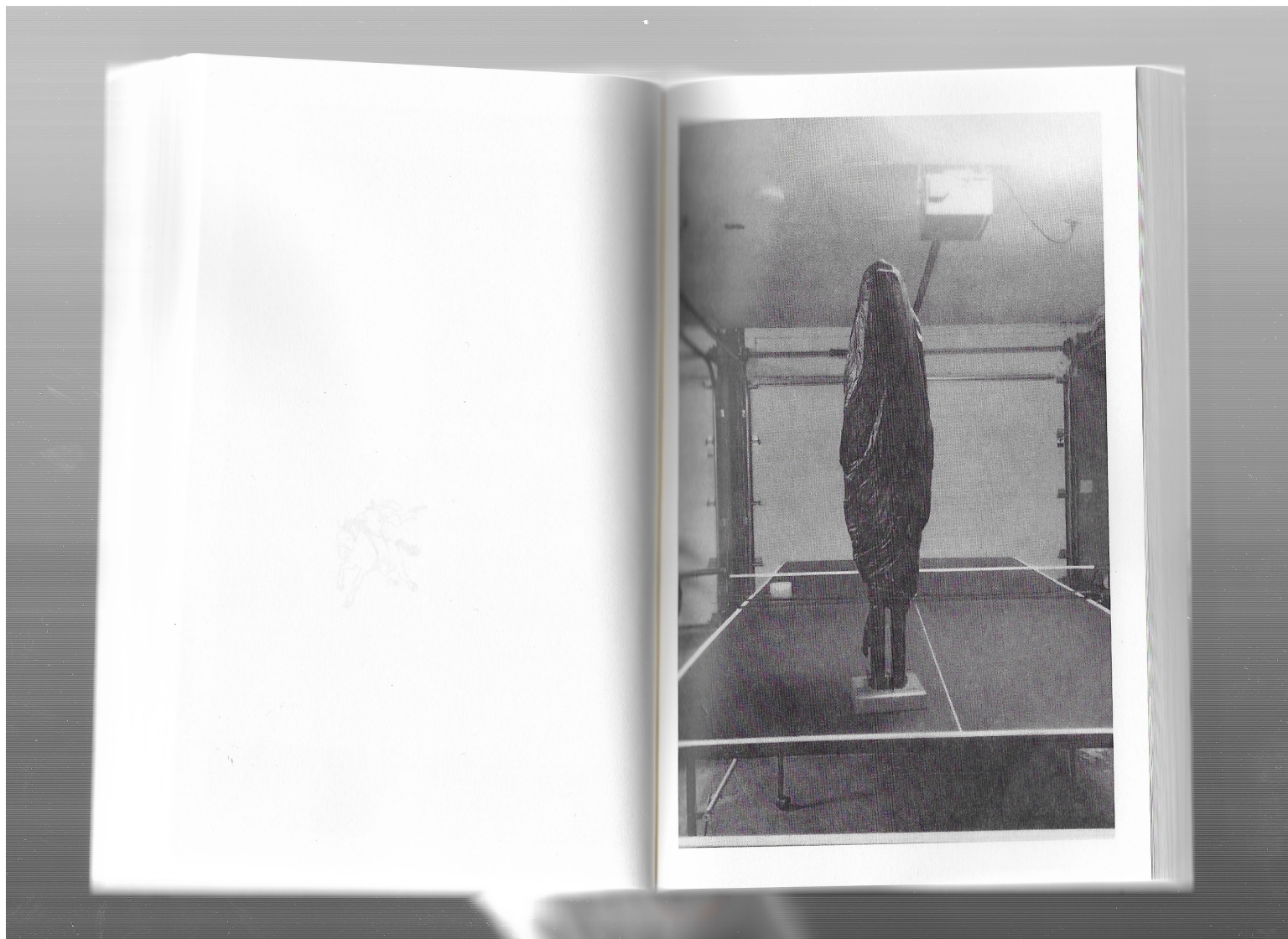




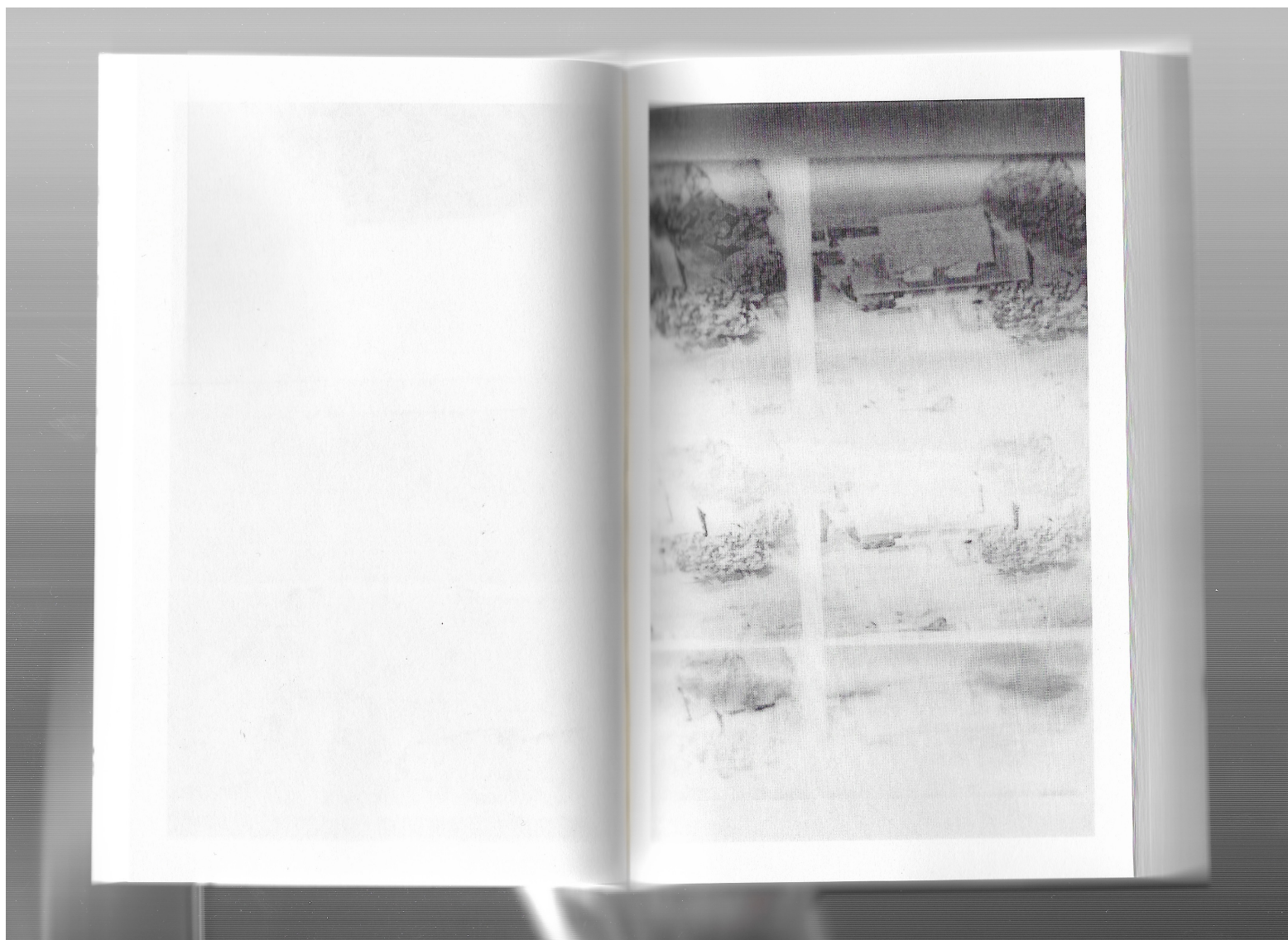




The woman who was backed into  
a corner and disappeared







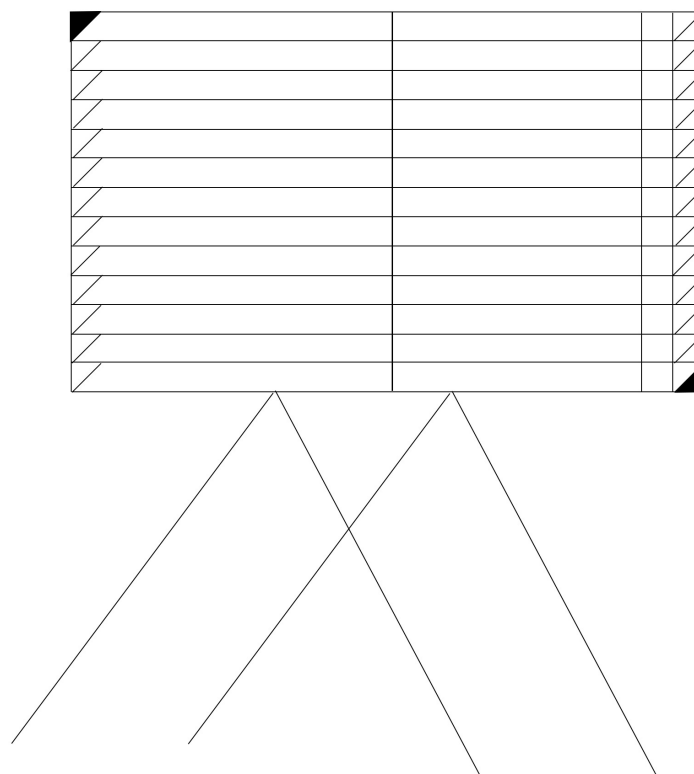












## 2 POEM FOR A FILM

~  
I cannot remember her voice - only  
the idea of her voice, what she said  
never how she said. I remember what  
I tell myself now  
of the things that matter. How her silken  
night gown waved in the wind  
as strangers haggled over the things she  
died caring for. I remember

laying awake in Las Vegas, a warm  
desert night - John Denver,  
the screen door, & her sweeping the floor  
as I lay, feigning sleep. And she knew  
we had been friends then - a team,  
estranged by virtue of something

that had come before my time. I remember  
the way she would sleep outside - I worried  
she would freeze to death. Off tune singing,  
binoculars to the stars - & rarely on a clear night.

~  
There is a great satisfaction to be had in yard work  
by night, gardening - pulling weeds by flashlight,  
something for herself. Desperation has a respite,  
in fantasy, & sadness by song - by disappearing.

~  
I return home, to a place washed  
in fog. Wet, & blackened - impoverishment  
has a way of letting  
the clouds come to ground.  
It is because of this place - the smell of rain,  
my ankles damp from morning frost,  
how time moves through the valley - I cannot  
help but see how much I have forgotten.

~  
Landscape is an Oregon living room  
filled with afternoon television - heavy breathing,

tiptoeing - sometimes one is so ill,  
they sleep in public.

Every breath, long & shallow,  
all meaning offset by pain: moving targets.

Landscape is the way one watches another  
float awake (still alive), glancing recognition,  
reassured someone is still paying attention -  
to witness what is happening, what will happen.

~  
Landscape is how I remember wanting the floor  
to be as comfortable as it was inviting.

Two toned, cleaned, then not clean. There was a special  
way she would skim her foot over the spot  
from off white, to white-white. No amount  
of shampoo can remove the smell

of vomit from cheap berber. I remember  
the exact way she vacuumed, straight

then reverse / curved / a little finesse / painting shapes,  
"how the carpet lay" / from one tone, and flipped.

~~~~~ &

*Rodeo walks - toe to heal, and completely vertical.
I can recognize her from any distance - the farthest
sometimes my favorite.

The moment before - a threshold between my heart,
knowing - and my eyes knowing - is a brief
time of faith and trust in the unremarkable.

To have another, sharing glances, w/ hands
pressed against - and any other variation
of loving attention. Nothing is too little.

